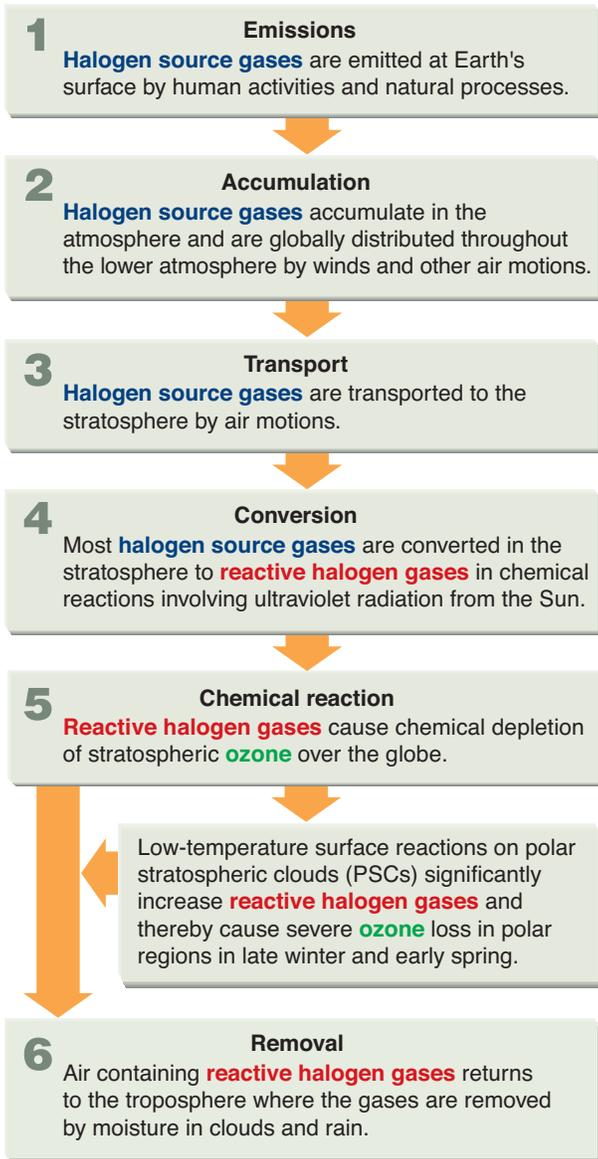


Q6

What are the principal steps in stratospheric ozone depletion caused by human activities?

The initial step in the depletion of stratospheric ozone by human activities is the emission, at Earth's surface, of gases containing chlorine and bromine. Most of these gases accumulate in the lower atmosphere because they are unreactive and do not dissolve readily in rain or snow. Natural air motions transport these accumulated gases to the stratosphere, where they are converted to more reactive gases. Some of these gases then participate in reactions that destroy ozone. Finally, when air returns to the lower atmosphere, these reactive chlorine and bromine gases are removed from Earth's atmosphere by rain and snow.

Principal Steps in the Depletion of Stratospheric Ozone



Emission, accumulation, and transport. The principal steps in stratospheric ozone depletion caused by human activities are shown in Figure Q6-1. The process begins with the *emission*, at Earth's surface, of source gases containing the halogens chlorine and bromine (see Q7). The halogen source gases, often referred to as ozone-depleting substances (ODSs), include manufactured chemicals released to the atmosphere in a variety of applications, such as refrigeration, air conditioning, and foam blowing. Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) are an important example of chlorine-containing gases. Emitted source gases *accumulate* in the lower atmosphere (troposphere) and are *transported* to the stratosphere by natural air motions. The accumulation occurs because most source gases are highly unreactive in the lower atmosphere. Small amounts of these gases dissolve in ocean waters. The low reactivity of these manufactured halogenated gases is one property that makes them well suited for specialized applications such as refrigeration.

Some halogen gases are emitted in substantial quantities from natural sources (see Q7). These emissions also accumulate in the troposphere, are transported to the stratosphere, and participate in ozone destruction reactions. These naturally emitted gases are part of the natural balance of ozone production and destruction that predates the large release of manufactured halogenated gases.

Figure Q6-1. Principal steps in stratospheric ozone depletion. The stratospheric ozone depletion process begins with the emission of halogen source gases by human activities and natural processes. Those emitted by human activities are also called ozone-depleting substances (ODSs). Subsequent steps are accumulation, transport, conversion, chemical reaction, and removal. Ozone depletion by halogen source gases occurs globally. Large seasonal ozone losses occur in polar regions as a result of reactions involving polar stratospheric clouds (PSCs). Ozone depletion ends when reactive halogen gases are removed by rain and snow in the troposphere and deposited on Earth's surface.

Conversion, reaction, and removal. Halogen source gases do not react directly with ozone. Once in the stratosphere, halogen source gases are chemically *converted* to reactive halogen gases by ultraviolet radiation from the Sun (see Q8). The rate of conversion is related to the atmospheric lifetime of a gas (see Q7). Gases with longer lifetimes have slower conversion rates and survive longer in the atmosphere after emission. Lifetimes of the principal ODSs vary from 1 to 100 years (see Q7). Emitted gas molecules with atmospheric lifetimes greater than a few years circulate between the troposphere and stratosphere multiple times, on average, before conversion occurs.

The reactive gases formed from halogen source gases *react* chemically to destroy ozone in the stratosphere (see Q9). The average depletion of total ozone attributed to reactive gases is smallest in the tropics and largest at high latitudes (see Q13). In polar regions, surface reactions that occur at low temperatures on polar stratospheric clouds (PSCs) greatly increase the abundance of the most reactive chlorine gas, chlorine monoxide (ClO) (see Q10). This results in substantial ozone

destruction in polar regions in late winter and early spring (see Q11 and Q12).

After a few years, air in the stratosphere returns to the troposphere, bringing along reactive halogen gases. These gases are then *removed* from the atmosphere by rain and other precipitation or deposited on Earth's land or ocean surfaces. This removal brings to an end the destruction of ozone by chlorine and bromine atoms that were first released to the atmosphere as components of halogen source gas molecules.

Tropospheric conversion. Halogen source gases with short lifetimes (less than 1 year) undergo significant chemical conversion in the troposphere, producing reactive halogen gases and other compounds. Source gas molecules that are not converted are transported to the stratosphere. Only small portions of reactive halogen gases produced in the troposphere are transported to the stratosphere because most are removed by precipitation. Important examples of halogen gases that undergo some tropospheric removal are the hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), methyl bromide (CH₃Br), and gases containing iodine (see Q7).

Understanding Stratospheric Ozone Depletion

Our understanding of stratospheric ozone depletion has been obtained through a combination of laboratory studies, computer models, and atmospheric observations. The wide variety of chemical reactions that occur in the stratosphere have been discovered and studied in *laboratory studies*. Chemical reactions between two gases follow well-defined physical rules. Some of these reactions occur on the surfaces of polar stratospheric clouds (PSCs) formed in the winter stratosphere. Reactions have been studied that involve many different molecules containing chlorine, bromine, fluorine, and iodine and other atmospheric constituents such as carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and hydrogen. These studies have shown that several reactions involving chlorine and bromine directly or indirectly destroy ozone in the stratosphere.

Computer models have been used to examine the combined effect of the large group of known reactions that occur in the stratosphere. These models simulate the stratosphere by including representative chemical abundances, winds, air temperatures, and the daily and seasonal changes in sunlight. These analyses show that under certain conditions chlorine and bromine react in catalytic cycles in which one chlorine or bromine atom destroys many thousands of ozone molecules. Models are also used to simulate ozone amounts observed in previous years as a strong test of our understanding of atmospheric processes and to evaluate the importance of new reactions found in laboratory studies. The responses of ozone to possible future changes in the abundances of trace gases, temperatures, and other atmospheric parameters have been extensively explored with specialized computer models (see Q20).

Atmospheric *observations* have shown what gases are present in different regions of the stratosphere and how their abundances vary. Gas and particle abundances have been monitored over time periods spanning a daily cycle to decades. Observations show that halogen source gases and reactive halogen gases are present in the stratosphere at the amounts required to cause observed ozone depletion. Ozone and chlorine monoxide (ClO), for example, have been observed extensively with a variety of instruments. ClO is a highly reactive gas that is involved in catalytic ozone destruction cycles throughout the stratosphere (see Q9). Instruments on the ground and on satellites, balloons, and aircraft now routinely detect ozone and ClO remotely using optical and microwave signals. High-altitude aircraft and balloon instruments are also used to detect both gases locally in the stratosphere (see Q5). The observations of ozone and reactive gases made in past decades are used extensively in comparisons with computer models in order to increase confidence in our understanding of stratospheric ozone depletion.